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The influence of political sophistication and party identification on party-voter congruence: a comparative analysis of 37 countries

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Abstract

In this paper, the individual ideological congruence between voters and parties is studied in a comparative perspective. We use data from the third module of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) to investigate the congruence between voters and their parties on the left-right scale. The results from the multilevel regression models suggest that, on the individual level, political knowledge increases the ideological congruence between voters and parties, whereas a strong party identification decreases this congruence. This suggests that party identification is indeed an affective orientation, which is not necessarily ideologically congruent with one's own ideological preferences. On the country-level, we did not observe the hypothesized relation between the effective number of parties (ENEP) and ideological congruence.

Keywords: Left-right, congruence, political sophistication, party identification, ENEP

Introduction

Over the past decades, we have observed a weakening of party attachments, together with an increase of volatility and a continuing decrease of party membership (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Lachat, 2007). Whereas party attachments and stable cleavage structures have traditionally been important determinants of voting behavior, there has been a shift towards issue voting (Dalton, 1996) and an overall individualization of the vote choice. However, making such a 'rational' vote choice based on the correspondence between the standpoints of the party and one's own standpoints requires that, first, voters have clear preferences and, second, that they are able to match their ideological position to that of one of the parties. This has been shown to be an exercise that requires a high level of political sophistication (Lau & Redlawsk, 1997). Particularly within the highly fragmented context of many contemporary democratic systems, less experienced, less knowledgeable and less interested citizens have been experiencing difficulties in matching their own preferences to a specific political party or candidate (Lau & Redlawsk, 1997). While the dealignment process in which the ideology and issue preferences of the individual's became more important voting motives, other motives such as candidates' personalities also gained ground (McAllister, 2007; Pierce, 1993). This evolution stirs concerns about the level of congruence between individual voter preferences and party choice. If this congruence indeed requires a high level of political sophistication, this may raise the question to what extent different groups in society are substantively represented. In the light of declining levels of political interest and participation in traditional party politics (Whiteley, 2010), there have been growing concerns on the quality and level of substantive representation.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to study the relation between political sophistication and the congruence between ideology and vote choice. Our aim is to contribute to the existing knowledge on

ideological congruency between voters and parties in two ways. First, we will examine the role of *political sophistication*. We do this not only by analyzing the bivariate relation between the two, but also by analyzing whether political sophistication provides a more important contribution in countries with a more complex party system. Second, we will contribute to the debate on the importance of *party identification*, by investigating the link between party ID and ideological congruence between voters and parties. As described above, a general decline in party identification is expected to improve the ‘quality of the vote choice’, provided that also ideology and not only short-term motives play a role in the decision-making process. This is the second mechanism that will be studied further in this paper. In the next part, we briefly go through the literature on substantive political representation and formulate hypotheses that will be tested with data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). After presenting the dataset and the operationalization of our variables, we will test our hypotheses with multi-level regression models.

The role of political sophistication and party identification

The field of research on the congruence between voters and parties started with one of the main works in this topic, namely the study on the constituency influence in the US Congress by Miller & Stokes (1963). They investigated whether individual issue positions are linked to the preferences of the representatives from congressional districts, which started up a stream of literature on ‘substantive representation’ (Powell, 2004).

The bulk of previous research on congruence between voters and parties uses aggregate comparisons between the mass and the elites (e.g. Freire & Belchior, 2013), for instance on the importance of the electoral system or the party system for representation (Blais & Bodet, 2006; Holmberg, 1999; Wessels, 1999). We argue that it is essential to study this congruence at the level of an individual voter as well, because these aggregate comparisons do not give us information on the individual dynamics that determine to what extent voters chose a party that is ideologically close to themselves.

In their study on the ‘quality of democratic representation’, Lau and Redlawsk (1997) have made an attempt to investigate the ability of individuals to choose a party close to their own preferences. They reframed the question on representativeness in more normative terms, by studying this as an ability to ‘vote correctly’. They argue that the health of democracy is often judged by the turnout rate in elections (e.g. M. N. Franklin, 2004), while we should not only focus on the question whether citizens go out to vote, but also on their ability to vote for the party that they *should* vote for if they wish to vote according to their individual preferences (Lau, Patel, Fahmy, & Kaufman, 2013). In this paper, we will not make any normative statements on the quality of vote choices, but we do build further on the theoretical argument that not only turnout, but also individual congruence should be important for democratic representation.

A first of these individual determinants that can enhance the likelihood that citizens vote for a party that is ideologically close to them is *political sophistication*. For the conceptualization of political sophistication, the level of political knowledge is the most important indicator (Lachat, 2007; Lau et al., 2013), and also in earlier research, a sufficient level of knowledge has been put forward as one of the main requirements for legitimate political representation. Scholars studying the development or differences in political knowledge among citizens argue that it is essential to make vote decisions in a well-considered way (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2001; Gibson & Hamilton, 2013; Grönlund & Milner, 2006). Political knowledge is essential, as argued, because citizens who have a limited view on politics will be less likely to come to a voting decision that is consistent with their own preferences and interests (Grönlund & Milner, 2006; Howe, 2010). Therefore, concerns on a growing unawareness and growing gaps in political knowledge among groups of citizens also reflect on similar concerns on the quality of democratic representation (Fraile, 2010; Howe, 2010). However, empirical results on the relation between political sophistication and congruence have been mixed. Lau et al. (2013) tested this assumption with respect to ‘correct voting’, and found that voters with a higher level of political sophistication are more inclined to vote for the party that is the closest to them ideologically. In second recent study on the ideological congruence between candidates and voters in the U.S. House elections (Simas, 2013), no significant relation was found between political knowledge and proximity voting, which is explained by the strong elite polarization in the U.S. system that makes that even those with low levels of political knowledge can use partisan cues for proximity voting.

In our hypothesis, we follow the same theoretical assumption that citizens will benefit from a higher level of political sophistication to come to a vote choice that is close to their ideological preference. This expectation is formulated in our first hypothesis:

H1: *The ideological congruence between voters and their preferred party is larger for citizens with a higher level of political sophistication.*

A second individual characteristic that can be expected to be related to party-vote congruence is party identification. Following the Michigan Group definition (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960 pp. 121), party identification can be seen as an individual’s *affective* orientation to an important group-object in his environment. Important to note is that this has been put forward as an affective concept, which is therefore not necessarily inspired by rational considerations. Furthermore, party identification is an orientation that is developed at a pre-political age, strongly influenced by one’s immediate social network and is presumed to be generally stable over time. In electoral research, party identification has been traditionally interpreted as a strong determinant of vote choice (Dalton, Farrell, & McAllister, 2011) and a cognitive heuristic that can serve as a shortcut for political decisions or preferences (Lau, Andersen, & Redlawsk, 2008).

Over the past decades, however, changes have led to a weakening of these stable party attachments (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). Retrospective evaluations and consequences of past voting behavior have become more important (Achen, 2002; Fiorina, 2002; C. H. Franklin, 1984), and the voting decision has generally become more individualized. This decline in vote choices based on an affective identification with a party has coincided with a rise in issue voting (Carmines & Stimson, 1980). The idea of issue voting has been interpreted as a rational choice way of political decision making (Downs, 1957), in which a voter chooses the party that is suited best to represent his/her personal preferences. However, as noted above, this kind of decision-making is also expected to require a high level of political sophistication, because voters need to have clear policy preferences and need to be able to match their position to that of the parties. As a consequence, the dealignment process also fostered a process in which other evaluations such as candidates' personalities, images and short-term campaign events became more important (McAllister, 2007; Pierce, 1993).

The decline in party identification can have two possible consequences for the ideological congruence between voters and parties. On the one hand, the affective identification with a political party has made way for more rational voting motives, leading voters to reevaluate their political parties within every election and making the choice that matches their preferences best even when they keep an attachment toward a party. Following this logic, we could expect citizens with no or a weak party identification to come more directly to a decision that is independent of an affective predisposition towards a certain party. In other words, this reasoning would lead us to the expectation that party identification is negatively related to voter-party congruence.

On the other hand, party identification has also been thought to be an 'unmoved mover' and serve as a cognitive heuristic in the sense that identifiers use the cues and information from a party to make sense of the complex political reality (see Johnston, 2006 for an extensive review). However, this traditional conceptualization has been criticized by proponents of a revisionist view, who state that party identification is more changeable and follows, rather than shapes individual policy preferences (Carsey & Layman, 2006; Fiorina, 2002).

Since party identification is an affective predisposition and the evidence of its ability to shape ideological preferences among voters is mixed, we hypothesize that there is a negative relation between party identification and voter-party congruence. We expect this to be mostly the case for strong identifiers, who will have a stronger affective predisposition towards a party than weak identifiers or leaners, who will be more likely to reevaluate their identification according to their ideological preferences.

H2: *There is a negative relation between party identification and ideological congruence between voters and parties.*

The party system

Early studies have shown that the rules of an electoral system can have an influence on the behavior of political parties (Downs, 1957; Duverger, 1951). Obviously, proportional representational systems present voters more accurately in a numerical sense, but Dalton (1985) also showed that PR systems are more accurate in representing voters in policy terms. His theoretical argument follows the logic that in plurality-based electoral systems, parties will mostly follow a moderate line to appeal to as many voters as possible, while parties have an incentive not to move too far from their voters in PR systems. Secondly, his analyses on the correspondence between voters and elites showed that the number of parties is also positively correlated with this congruence, since a larger number of parties increases the likelihood that voters find a party that matches their individual preferences more accurately. However, when we look at individual voters, it is again important to take into account their cognitive ability to make such reasoned choices. In their analyses on the influence of the macro-contexts on individual-level vote choice, Klingemann and Wessels (2009) show that when confronted with a large number of parties, voters are enforced to look for ways to reduce the complexity that comes with this larger supply. This supports the logic that is set out in the study by Lau et al. (2013) stating that the larger the number of parties running in an election, the more difficult the choice becomes and the more information must be gathered. They found a clear relation between the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP, see Laakso & Taagepera, 1979) and the ability of individuals to ‘vote correctly’. With two alternatives, 79 percent of the respondents was able to cast a vote in line with their preferences, while less than 57 percent was able to cast a vote when there are nine alternatives to choose from (Lau et al., 2013 pp. 16). A larger number of parties seems to reduce the number of ‘correct votes’. However, when looking at these results, we should keep in mind that Lau et al. (2013) study ‘correct voting’ and that these results do not necessarily tell us anything about substantive representation. It might be the case, for instance, that the ideological distance between a far leftist voter and the only center leftist party is very large, but because of the limited options within the party system, a vote for the center leftist party is the only ‘correct’ possibility.

Nevertheless, these findings indicate that, although the number of parties should increase the likelihood that citizens can find a party that is ideologically close to them (Dalton, 1985), this does not weigh up against the increased complexity that comes with this larger supply. Therefore, we expect that the effective number of parties is negatively related to the congruence between voters and parties.

H3: *A larger effective number of electoral parties decreases the ideological congruence between voters and parties.*

Finally, we expect that this additional complexity will mainly decrease the congruence for voters with lower levels of political sophistication (Simas, 2013). Those citizens with higher levels of political knowledge and education will be more likely to have enough information to disentangle the

complexities of the party system (Lau et al., 2013). Therefore, we expect that a larger number of parties mostly decreases the ideological congruence between voters and parties for those voters with lower levels of political sophistication. In other words, we expect that the difference between high sophisticated and low sophisticated voters will be larger in countries with a larger effective number of parties.

H4: *The relation between political sophistication and voter-party congruence is stronger in countries with a higher effective number of political parties.*

Finally, we should note that in this paper we will only be focusing on one pillar of these political representation studies, namely on the idea of ‘proximity’ that was put forward by Achen (1978). He underscores the importance of calculating the ideological distance between the citizens of a constituency and its legislator. The main argument is that, to obtain real representativeness, the ideas of those who are elected should closely mirror the views of the citizens who elect them. Therefore, he calculates the mean squared difference between the scale positions of the representative and a constituent. In this paper, we transfer this candidate-centered logic to a measure of ideological proximity that can be applied in a broader comparative perspective. We do not calculate the distance between a voter and his/her individual legislator, but the mean distance between voters and their preferred party in a country. With this idea of congruence between voters and parties we propose a general measure of ideological representativeness, which will serve as our main dependent variable in this study.

Data and method

Data

In order to verify our hypotheses on the effects of multi-party systems on vote congruence, we needed a cross-national data set that is not restricted to Europe. Most of the seminal studies on congruence have taken place in the United States (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). To build the dependent variable, congruence, we needed data on respondents’ self-placement on a left-right scale and the location of parties on that same scale. We opted for the use of a clear and one-dimensional measure for congruence, to optimize the comparability between the countries. Although it has the limitation of being an abstract and very general measure of ideology, and there is strong evidence that political attitudes are structured by more than one dimension (Lachat, 2009; Van Spanje & Van Der Brug, 2007), left-right identification still is the only available tool that can effectively align political issues and define the space of political competition on one axis. The most important advantage of this approach is that we can create a clear measure for congruence, that can be compared across countries.

The third module of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) thus meets these criteria. Plus, one of the main advantages of the CSES is that the self-placement and the placement of parties on the left-right scale are located at the same point temporally (Golder & Stramski, 2010). Some countries have been excluded beforehand. Relying on the Freedom House ratings, we have dropped countries that are not free such as Belarus, Turkey, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Thailand. Taiwan also has had to be excluded because the effective number of electoral parties and disproportionality measure were not available for the year previous to the election year. It leaves us with 39 elections to study which totalizes 36,230 respondents. For consistency reasons, we only consider legislative elections, but we don't discriminate on the voting rule in the country.

Dependent variable: congruence

In order to capture the absolute distance on a left-right scale between a voter and the party she voted for, we have calculated the absolute difference between the experts placement on the left-right scale of the party respondents voted for and their self-placement on this scale. The result is then subtracted from the maximum distance one could have (10) in order to have a congruence scale that is more intuitive. In other words, as numbers go up, congruence is higher. Congruence is high when the absolute distance between the voter and the party they voted for is small on the left-right scale. The dependent variable has been rescaled to range from 0 to 1 in order to ease interpretation.

The mean congruence C is calculated as:

$$C = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^{n_{ij}} (10 - |v_{ij} - p_j|) \quad (1)$$

In which v_{ij} is the 0-10 score on the left-right identification scale of voter i in country j , p_j is the expert placement of the left-right identification of the voter's preferred party in country j , and n is the sample size.

In Table 1, we present the congruence means by elections. The 2011 Estonian election is the election for which the distance between voters and the party they voted for is the largest. The country has about 6 effective electoral parties. The two next countries with the lowest congruence are South Africa (2009) and United States (2008) whereas in both countries the effective electoral parties are about 2. The United States are also politically known for the importance given to partisan identification when it comes to cast a ballot (Thomassen & Rosema, 2009). The 5 following elections with the lowest congruence are also often considered as emerging democracies and are located in South America – except for Mexico that is geographically in North America but still shares a same set of characteristics. The distance between the voter and the party they voted for may have consequences for the democratic linkage between the citizens and the political elites. In Estonia, in 2011, 40% of the citizens did not

vote for the party that is closest to their left-right preference. The rest of the mean distribution ranges between approximately 80 points to 88 points. We can find most of the Scandinavian countries at the highest congruence end.

Table 1. Congruence means by elections in ascending order

Elections	Congruence means	Elections	Congruence means
Estonia 2011	.601	Portugal 2009	.838
South Africa 2009	.667	Iceland 2007	.840
United States 2008	.687	Germany 2005	.842
Mexico 2009	.688	Czech Republic 2006	.844
Brazil 2006	.706	The Netherlands 2010	.845
Brazil 2010	.715	Finland 2007	.845
Peru 2011	.770	Switzerland 2007	.850
Mexico 2006	.778	Norway 2009	.849
Poland 2005	.797	Canada 2008	.851
South Korea 2008	.800	Denmark 2007	.851
Austria 2008	.808	Norway 2005	.854
Australia 2007	.813	France 2007	.856
Latvia 2010	.816	Czech Republic 2010	.857
Croatia 2007	.821	The Netherlands 2006	.861
Slovakia 2010	.821	Finland 2011	.863
Poland 2007	.822	Iceland 2009	.870
Ireland 2007	.827	Germany 2009	.874
Greece 2009	.830	Sweden 2006	.883
Israel 2006	.835	Spain 2008	.890
New Zealand 2008	.837		

Source: CSES – Module 3, own calculations.

Independent variables

Our two main independent variables of interest on the individual-level are political sophistication and partisan identification. For the conceptualization of political sophistication, a lot of different indicators have been used, such as political interest, general level of education, exposure to political information and political knowledge (Dassonneville, 2012; Lachat, 2007). In our conceptualization, we follow the argument set forward by Lachat (2007), among others, that political knowledge is the most valuable indicator: “Actually, a large body of literature does exist and it shows that this is the best single indicator of a person’s level of political sophistication” (Lachat, 2007 : 57).. CSES comprises three political knowledge questions that are adapted to each country-year election. The variable is coded from 0 (no right answers) to 3 (all answers right). Second, partisan identification is also coded as a categorical variable and has 3 categories: respondents without a partisan id and the weak identifiers are

coded 0, respondents that said they have a partisan id and they felt somewhat close are coded 0.5 and the *strong* identifiers that have a partisan id and feel very close to the party are coded 1. The non-identifiers (0) are used as a reference category in the analyses. At the individual-level we then also control for age (continuous variable) and gender (females are coded 1) as important antecedent variables. Finally, we also control for the level of formal education, which is coded in four categories: no or only a primary education, secondary education, college education and university education and higher.

Furthermore, on the country-level, our main independent variables of interest is the effective number of electoral parties (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979). For a further understanding of the dynamics of the party system, we have also included a variable on the level of disproportionality of the party system. Next to the effective number of parties, this gives us some more insight on the importance of party-system characteristics on congruence. Here, we follow the suggestion from Blais and Aarts (2006) to not include dummies for party systems, but rather to include measures for the effective number of electoral parties and disproportionality from the previous election. *“Disproportionality can be conceptualized as a summary measure that takes into account both the electoral formula and district magnitude”* (Blais & Aarts, 2006 : 188). We take these ratings from the election that comes before the election measured in the CSES. Temporally, it would be illogical to take the ratings of the election in which the respondents voted. Michael Gallagher’s *Election Indices Dataset* has been used to retrieve these indices. In Table 2, one can find descriptive information about all the independent variables.

Table 2. Descriptive information

Variables	Min	Max	Mean	Standard deviation	N
Congruence	0	1	0.82	0.16	36, 230
Education	1	4	2.54	0.99	36, 230
Political knowledge	0	3	1.76	0.97	36, 230
Partisan identification	1	3	1.62	0.75	36, 230
Gender	0	1	0.50	0.50	36, 230
Age	16	100	48.09	16.82	36, 230
Disproportionality	.26	21.95	4.77	4.34	39
Effective number of electoral parties	1.97	10.62	4.72	1.39	39

Source: CSES – Module 3, own calculations.

Method

In order to verify our hypotheses, we decided to perform multilevel regression models because of the nested nature – individuals within countries – of the CSES data. This method is particularly well suited

for our approach because we are interested in the effects of both contextual variables such as the party system and the voting formulae, but also in the effects of individual-level variables. Our dependent variable is a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 1 which thus explains the use of multiple linear multilevel regressions. We will first start by looking at the bivariate relation with each independent variable of interest in order to have a first glance at the mechanisms leading to vote congruence. Then, we will test our hypotheses by looking at the same relationships with control variables present at both levels.

Results

As a first step, we investigate the relationship between congruence and each of the main independent variable with bivariate regressions, presented in Table 3. If we look at partisan identification, we see that respondents that feel somewhat close to a party have a slightly higher score on the congruence scale compared to respondents that have no partisan identification or a weak attachment to a party. On the other side, respondents that feel very close to a party have less probability to cast a congruent vote compared to respondents that have no PID. This could be explained by the fact that strong identifiers identify with a party for other reasons than their position on the left-right scale. Secondly, if we look at the relation between the number of parties and the congruence between voters and parties, we see that the coefficient is positive but not strong. Still, we see that a higher number of parties correlates positively with party-voter congruence. Thirdly, if we look at the relation between political knowledge and congruence, we find a positive and significant relation between the two, being slightly stronger than political knowledge. Generally, a strong partisan identification has the strongest effect along with education, but the latter has a greater role in explaining congruence.

Table 3. Bivariate regressions of the effects on congruence (0-1)

	b(SE)	R-squared
Partisan identification		
(ref cat. No/weak identification)	---	
Somewhat close	.007*** (.001)	
Strong identifiers	-.027*** (.002)	0.005
Effective number of electoral parties	.010*** (.000)	0.008
Political knowledge	.013*** (.001)	0.006

Note: Entries are unstandardized b-coefficients from bivariate regression models. Standard errors (SE) are in parentheses. *p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

As a second step, we investigate the effects of the explanatory variables on congruence by means of a multilevel regression model. Table 4 reports the results for all models. The first model presented is the

null model. Second, the individual-level factors are added followed by the country-year level factors. The last model of Table 4 includes all above-mentioned variables to which we added a cross-level interaction variable of the number of parties and political knowledge.

The estimation of the null model indicates an intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) of 0.166. The variation between elections is thus 16% which suggests that context-specific differences are important. In Model A, we see that higher political knowledge is linked to higher congruence. If we look at the relation with party identification, we see that results are mixed. For respondents who only felt somewhat close to a party, the effect is positive, but quite small compared to those that have no partisan identification. In other words, having a strong attachment to a party is negatively related to the ideological congruence with this party. The coefficient is again quite small, but slightly larger than for those that somewhat identify to a party. The coefficient of age is negative and significant, but the very close to 0. The regression coefficient for gender suggests that men (coded 0) have a slightly smaller probability than women to cast a congruent vote. The relation between education and congruence is positive and significant. The higher the level of education, the higher is the congruence.. In Model B, we have included country-level factors. We are mainly interested in the effect of the effective number of electoral parties. In the bivariate regression analysis, we found a positive relation while in the multilevel multiple regression model, the sign is reversed and the coefficient becomes not significant. The disproportionality control variable is also not significant. If we look at the evolution of the intra-class correlation (ICC) throughout the model, we see that the variables in the model are not suited to explain variation in between countries because the ICC does not even decrease of a decimal throughout the models.

Table 4. Multilevel regression models explaining congruence

	Null model	Model A	Model B	Model C
	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)
Intercept	0.813*** (-0.01)	0.773*** (0.011)	0.783*** (0.032)	0.768*** (0.033)
<i>Individual variables (1st level)</i>				
Political knowledge		0.013*** (0.001)	0.013*** (0.001)	0.018*** (0.003)
Party Identification (ref cat. No/weak identification)				
Somewhat close		0.007*** (0.002)	0.007*** (0.002)	0.007*** (0.002)
Strong identifiers		-0.011*** (0.002)	-0.011*** (0.002)	-0.011*** (0.002)
Age		-0.000* (0.000)	-0.000* (0.000)	-0.000* (0.000)
Gender		-0.004** (0.002)	-0.004** (0.002)	-0.004** (0.002)
Education		0.01*** (0.000)	0.01*** (0.000)	0.01*** (0.000)
<i>Country-level variables (2nd level)</i>				
Effective number of electoral parties			-0.003 (0.005)	0.001 (0.005)
Disproportionality			0.001 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)
<i>Cross-level interaction</i>				
ENEP*Political Knowledge				-0.001* (0.000)
Variance country-year level	0.004	0.004	0.004	0.004
ICC	0.166	0.165	0.164	0.163

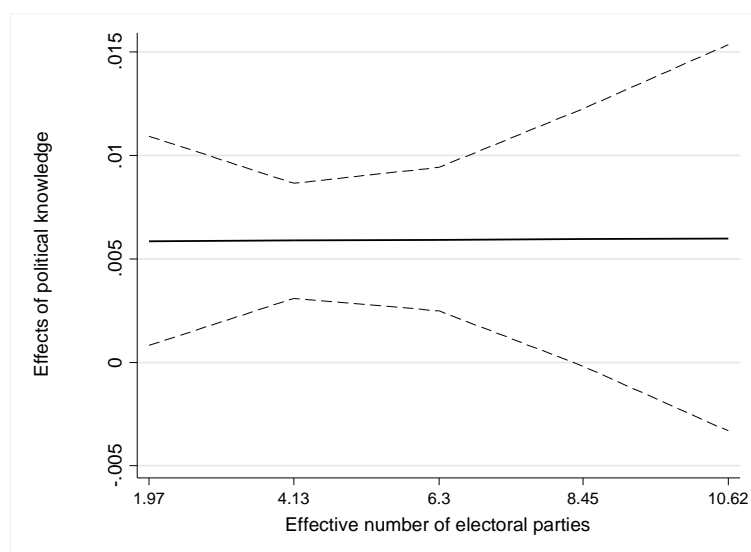
Source : CSES - Module 3, own calculations.

Notes: Entries are unstandardized b-coefficients from linear multilevel regression models Standard errors (SE) are in parentheses. *p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

In Model C, we repeat the same model but with the addition of the cross-level interaction variable. Even if we theoretically expect that political knowledge interacts with the number of parties in each election, we have verified the full model with a random slope for political knowledge in order to see if the variable indeed acts differently in each country. The estimate of the amount of variation of political knowledge in each country is 0.0002153. Statistically, we should not expect much variation from the interaction term. The effect is negative and significant at the 0.05 significance level but is not strong due to a -0.001* coefficient. Because the effect can be misleading and hard to interpret, we follow the

suggestion to graph the interaction effect (Brambor, Clark, & Golder, 2005). In Figure 1, the dotted line is the 95% confidence interval and the solid line represents the simulations of predictions of each cutting point between the interaction variable and congruence. while the other variables of the model are kept at their mean values. We present the predictions using Model C of Table 4 to which we added a random slope for political knowledge. The relationship between congruence and political knowledge is not significant for countries that have more than approximately 8 parties. Only Brazil in 2006 and Brazil in 2010 have more than 8 parties in each election. Thus, the expected interactive effect of political knowledge and the number of parties is indeed positive, but very small.

Figure 1 – Interaction effects on congruence of ENEP and political knowledge



Discussion

Three main conclusions can be drawn from these results. First, with regard to the first hypothesis on political sophistication, the models indicate that congruence between voters and parties is indeed higher among highly sophisticated voters. As expected, political knowledge is positively correlated to the left-right congruence measure we proposed in this paper.

Second, we observed an interesting relationship between party identification and congruence. When compared with weak or non-identifiers (independents), voters with a strong party identification seem to have a lower level of left-right congruence between themselves and the party they vote for. Although this might seem counterintuitive, it is in line with what we could expect from the literature on party identification. Following the definition that was set out in the ‘American Voter’ (Campbell et al., 1960), an identification with a political party is in the first place an affective, and thus not necessarily rational, orientation. So while one might have a strong identification with a political party, this does not implicate that there is a high ideological congruence between the voter and the party. On

the contrary, it seems to be the case that those voters who do not claim to identify with any party have a stronger ideological congruence with the party they eventually vote for. This is more in line with the idea of an individual and rational vote choice. Instead of being socialized into strongly identifying with one particular party and also voting for this party, independent voters seem to make a more rational choice in the sense that it is more congruent with their own ideological preferences.

Third, we observed variation between the countries in terms of the mean ideological congruence between voters and parties, but this could not be explained by the party system. Whereas we expected that a higher number of parties would increase the complexity of the vote choice and therefore decrease the congruence between voters and parties, we did not find a strong relation between the number of parties and congruence. This could indicate that the number of parties not only increases complexity, but also increase the possibility that one of the parties is ideologically close for an individual voter (Dalton, 1985), which cancels the expected negative effect of complexity out (Blais & Bodet, 2006). Moreover, these null-findings with respect to the effective number of parties are interesting since they contradict what Lau et al (2013) found on ‘correct voting’, also using the comparative CSES data. They found that a larger number of parties decreases the chance that one votes for the party that is ideologically ‘closest’ to them, but this does not mean that the distance between voters and parties is strong. For instance, in the United States, a very leftist voter would vote ideologically logical when s/he voted for the Democratic Party (correct vote), while the ideological distance might be very large. This underscores the importance of studying the ideological distance between individual voters and parties.

The findings in this paper open up possibilities for future research in this respect. First, more needs to be done with respect to the differences between countries. The descriptive results and the null model in the regression analysis show a strong variation between countries, but this could not be explained by the country-level mechanisms that were included in this paper. Future studies could analyze these country differences more in-depth to come to a better understanding of this strong variation.

A second suggestion for future research would be to include more diverse measures for ideological congruence. One of the limitations of this paper is that we use a one-dimensional measure for ideological congruence, whereas this is not fully in line with the more complex ideological reality of some of the countries that are studied here. Future studies could extend this measure to a two- or more dimensional model in which not only the traditional left-right division is taken into account to measure the ideological distance between voters and parties.

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